

Battling Gang Recruitment: How can the Community Profile Database help?

Low attachment to community . . . poor school attendance . . . negative peers . . . antisocial behavior . . . no adult supervision . . . These terms may be voiced frequently in discussions of gang problems in Virginia's communities among community leaders, child advocates, law enforcement officers, politicians, policy makers, and criminal justice and social service providers. They may evoke a grim picture of youth susceptibility to negative, and perhaps deadly, associations. But what do they really mean?

These terms originate from the research of Hawkins and Catalano, who have constructed a theoretical framework of "risk" and "protective" factors that predispose youth to harmful or constructive behavior, relationships, and life outlook.¹

What makes youth likely to join gangs? Research provides insight into gang recruitment and youth amenability to such recruitment. Washington State University's Cooperative Extension Winter 1994 Research Review: Gang Violence and Prevention² summarizes these reasons youth joins gangs:

- a search for love, structure, and discipline;
- a sense of belonging and commitment;
- the need for recognition and power;
- companionship, training, excitement, and activities;
- a sense of self worth and status;
- a place of acceptance;
- the need for physical safety and protection; and
- a family tradition.³

The research review also cites and explains some factors that may affect a youth's decision to enter a gang:

- **Racism** - When young people encounter both personal and institutional racism (i.e., systematic denial of privileges), the risks are increased. When groups of people are denied access to power, privileges, and resources, they will often form their own anti-establishment group.
- **Poverty** - A sense of hopelessness can result from being unable to purchase wanted goods and services. Young people living in poverty may find it difficult to meet basic physical and psychological needs which can lead to a lack of self-worth and pride. One way to earn cash is to join a gang involved in the drug trade.
- **Lack of a support network** - Gang members often come from homes where they feel alienated or neglected. They may turn to gangs when their needs for love are not being met at home. Risks increase when the community fails to provide sufficient youth programs or alternatives to violence.

- *Media influences* - Television, movies, radio, and music all have profound effects on youth development. Before youth have established their own value systems and are able to make moral judgments, the media promotes drugs, sex, and violence as an acceptable lifestyle.⁴

In their Gang Awareness Handbook for Parents, Teachers, and Concerned Citizens, the Youth Crime Service Unit of the San Antonio Police Department lists and explains some additional reasons youth may join gangs:

- *Acceptance* - Many kids feel that they are not getting the attention they feel they deserve at home. They start looking for this attention and love in other places and often find what they are looking for in a gang. The gang essentially becomes their family.
- *Excitement* - This group of kids love the high of committing crimes and getting away with it. They often do their crimes just to be chased by the police. These individuals are adrenaline junkies and love the thrill of criminal activity.
- *To earn money* - More and more, we are seeing gang members turn towards using the gang to make a profit through illegal activities. Selling narcotics, robberies, burglaries, auto thefts, and other property crimes are common in many gangs. Many gangs specialize in certain criminal activity.
- *Peer Pressure* - If your kids are hanging around gangs and gang members you can almost guarantee that they are being pressured to join the gang. It is important to know who your children are associating with.
- *Protection* - In poor neighborhoods and neighborhoods with high gang activity, kids often have to join a gang just to survive. It is often easier to join the gang than to be victimized on a daily basis.
- *To Socialize* - The best parties in town are gang parties. Easy access to liquor, narcotics, and girls are attractive to potential gang recruits. Young males who have a hard time socializing and talking to girls find girls often like gang members.⁵

Underlying these reasons are some basic risk factors related to gang involvement. The National Youth Gang Center, citing research by experts including James Howell and J. David Hawkins, advances these risk factors as predictive of gang membership:

- prior and/or early involvement in delinquency (especially violence and alcohol/drug use);
- poor family management and problematic parent-child relations;
- low school attachment and achievement;
- negative labeling by teachers;
- association with aggressive peers and peers who engage in delinquency;
- neighborhoods in which large numbers of youth are in trouble; and
- neighborhoods in which drugs and firearms are readily available.⁶

Other research suggests additional indicators related to gang membership. A racially based analysis of Hispanic, African American, and White adolescents in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 cohort found that being male and having siblings in gangs were gang membership predictors for White and Hispanic youth. For Black youth, the predictors were being male and having negative peers. Poverty was an additional indicator for White youth.⁷ Another study comparing the criminal behavior of youth gangs and at-risk youth found the median age at which youth start "hanging around" gangs is 13; the median age for joining a gang, 14.⁸

These risk factors may pinpoint youth who are or are not in gangs or indicate neighborhoods with gang activity, but the specifics of understanding *gang recruitment* may have more to do with understanding (i) gang organization and tactics and (ii) why youth want to join gangs.

A Southwest Seattle Weed and Seed Community Safety Bulletin outlines the following gang recruitment techniques:

- **Seduction** - For a long time gangs have used this technique to recruit new members. They create glorified myths about the gang that are very attractive to young recruits, and very often these myths become the foundation for young aspirations. The most powerful of these trappings, however, are the promise of money, sex, and glamour.
- **Subterfuge** - Subterfuge is a misrepresentation of what the gang really is and what it stands for. Recruiters use lies and schemes to convince the youth that it really isn't a gang, it's a club or it is really a group of close friends that have to protect themselves against a powerful enemy.
- **Obligation** - Often gang members will do a favor or make a loan of something to a prospective recruit and demand that they give loyalty as payback. Often, these favors come in the form of protection. Girls are sometimes used to promote that sense of obligation.
- **Coercion** - Forced recruitment is an age-old technique, used most often by large gangs in chronic gang cities. Coercion is usually accomplished by threats, but physical beatings are used as well.
- **Self-Recruitment** - For many reasons, youth will make contact with gang members and ask to join the gang. The reasons are many and not always because the individual sees the gang as glamorous. The reason may be one of necessity, money, protection etc. The reasons may be a combination of all of the trappings mentioned above.⁹

What can be done to reduce gang recruitment? Again drawing from risk and protective factor theory, intervening early to limit the influence of risk factors in the lives of youth will begin to reduce recruitment. Conversely, research has identified factors that help to strengthen and shield youth from susceptibility to gang recruitment. Emmy E. Werner's work on protective factors and individual resilience found characteristics among children living in poverty and adverse situations that made them "stress-resistant." The research review suggests these as factors that also protect youth from gang involvement:

- The children were well-liked by peers and adults, and they had well-developed social and interpersonal skills.
- They were reflective rather than impulsive about their behavior. They had a high sense of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal responsibility.
- They had an internal locus of control; i.e., they believed they were able to influence their environment in a positive manner.
- They demonstrated an ability to be flexible in their coping strategies. They had well-developed problem solving skills and intellectual abilities.¹⁰

There are a number of programs and strategies that are effective in reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors. While it is tempting to jump to implementing programs and strategies, it is important to ensure that the programs and strategies implemented match the specific needs of the community. This requires the interim step of collecting data to inform the planning process.

How can my community develop a comprehensive anti-gang strategy? Developing a comprehensive community strategy to reduce gang recruitment begins with collaboration. Build an

interagency team of leaders and key informants in your community that includes not only law enforcement and juvenile justice, but also schools, recreation, housing, social services, public and private service providers, the faith community and others who are involved with youth.

Next, gather information on risk factors, protective factors, and gang activity in your community. Information should include data from a variety of sources to provide a complete picture to inform your discussions.

Potential types and sources of data.

- The National Youth Gang Center's annual National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) of law enforcement agencies across the United States probes the presence and characteristics of local gangs. While the survey identifies critical areas of concern, its findings are representative of the nation as a whole, and cannot be assumed representative of specific counties or cities. Similarly, the periodic School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) of public elementary and secondary school principals¹¹ and the School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)¹² include nationally representative findings on gang behavior and prevalence.
- Observations of graffiti patterns, while not scientific, can give an indication of gang activity and areas of the community involved.
- Anecdotal information can provide context for local data and help explain trends—but it may not be representative of the entire population.
- Service volume trends can provide information on types of activities and behaviors being seen in the community—but they do not include undetected activity and trends.
- Some local law enforcement agencies are collaborating with their neighbors to exchange gang intelligence information that may inform discussions.
- Some localities periodically conduct youth surveys, usually administered in a school setting. A variety of survey instruments are used by various localities, but many include questions on issues related to gang activity including violence and substance abuse. While all surveys are subject to self-reporting bias, many have proven validity and reliability, and provide a level of detail not available through other data sources.
- All school divisions collect and report incidents of discipline, crime, and violence that occur during school activities, including specifically "gang activities"¹³. Incidents of substance abuse, bullying, fighting and battery incidents may also be indicators of gang coercion.
- The **Community Profile Database** includes a variety of social indicators that are archival, descriptive, objective data, most from governmental sources. Collected in the normal course of governmental service provision, they predate any specific research objectives. They can serve as proxies for more precise measures that may be unavailable or impractical to obtain. They also can document trends over time.
 - The **DATA** Tab provides a variety of data, organized by topical area (e.g., gangs) or by risk and protective factor, to assist in using objective data to assess community needs and monitoring progress in addressing those needs. It includes data by:
 - geographical areas (city, county, ZIP Code, where available);
 - demographic characteristic (age, race/ethnicity, gender, where available); and
 - format (numbers, rates or percentages, as available).

- Once data are compiled and analyzed, the collaborative team can hold informed discussions, looking for patterns of risk, determining where protective factors already are being developed, and identifying gaps in service.

Ways to analyze data. Data can identify youth at risk of gang recruitment and areas where these youth reside or in which they may be recruited. Data can also delineate presence or absence of protective factors by reporting indicators related to family stability and school achievement, for instance. Data can also inform decisions as to how to counter gang recruitment by identifying and quantifying the number of after school programs, community organizations, or other sources to promote protective factors in an area.

Going to the **Community Profile Database** for data on your community's economic deprivation, concentration of school drop outs and juvenile delinquents, and areas of unemployment may be your first instinct since these factors are commonly accepted as related to gang activity. While this approach may be useful and warranted, take care to frame specific research questions and collect information in a logical way that responds to those individual questions. Also, if you are tasked with researching gangs, identify the exact focus of the request so that you may be better able to isolate the desired information.

The data may suggest priorities for addressing some risk factors before others. Leading researchers promoting a strategic risk-based response to youth gangs advise acknowledging a risk factor's importance and amenability to change.¹⁴ Whereas being male and poverty are risk factors for gang membership, those characteristics may be unchangeable. Be practical in selecting your targets. Your community efforts may not reduce poverty but may have a great effect on improving the safety of an area.

That negative peers are a risk factor for gang membership and that ages 13-14 are median ages for gang association and recruitment are notable and can guide intervention as long as the importance of these factors is borne out by your community's data and experience. Similarly, identifying where the gangs meet and the places where they would interact with non-gang youth are obvious data necessary to address gang recruitment. Identification of youth with siblings in gangs is also a first step towards protecting those youth from gang recruitment.

The motives for joining a gang can be examined through data as well. Youth surveys may show some measures of youth self worth and safety concerns. Family bonding indicators and counts of community centers and Boys and Girls Clubs may serve as indicators related to the degree to which youth are searching for love, structure, and discipline or have places of acceptance, to illustrate two motives. Strategies and resources to address motives can be developed once measures of motive strength or importance are considered.

Indicator data can describe resistance of youth to gang recruiting techniques. Youth surveys, community bullying initiatives, School Resource Officer reports, and law enforcement threat complaints may provide information related to local gang recruitment, and some measures from each could serve as proxy indicators of gang recruitment. By isolating specific recruitment techniques, coping tools to counter intimidation, impulsivity, and deception can be implemented which may protect youth from recruitment pressure.

Graphing, charting, and/or mapping this multi-dimensional data may allow for obvious and effective recognition of high risk areas. (Hawkins provides an example of a 3-dimensional "Distribution of Risk in a City" in The Knowledge Base for Prevention Science: What's New? A presentation to the 20th Annual Florida Statewide Prevention Conference, September 20, 2006, Orlando, Florida: <http://depts.washington.edu/sdrg/orlando.pdf>, slide #24)

Finding the right programs and strategies. Once data are thoroughly analyzed and discussed, the **Community Profile Database** has two resources for locating information on programs and strategies to meet the needs prioritized through examining and discussing data.

The **RESOURCE** tab links users to best practice information including:

- sources for finding evidence-based programs that research has proven are effective in preventing or intervening in adolescent problem behaviors;
- downloadable research articles and prevention materials;
- resource websites and clearinghouses;
- program performance measures required by federal agencies;
- information on formulating and monitoring program outcome measures; and
- resources for evaluating programs for improvement.

As on the **DATA** Tab, resources may be found by topical area (e.g., gangs) or by risk and protective factor.

The **PROGRAM** tab includes information on programs operating in Virginia that are modeled on evidence-based programs that have been proven effective by evaluation. Users can search, using a variety of criteria, for information including contact information for networking, potential funding sources, and descriptions of the programs. Users may choose from a variety of parameters to include in their reports, as well as the order in which to display them. Reports may be downloaded as word processing files, .pdf files, or spreadsheets.

Finally, to provide additional information and assistance in developing a comprehensive community anti-gang strategy, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the National Youth Gang Center have developed a *Strategic Planning Tool* to help communities through the process outlined briefly above. It can be found at: <http://www.iir.com/nygc/tool/default.htm> .

All these resources can be helpful in developing a comprehensive community plan to reduce gang recruitment.

¹ The Communities That Care (CTC) process was developed by J. David Hawkins, Ph.D. and Richard Catalano, Ph.D. to help communities plan, implement, and evaluate proven-effective prevention programs to meet community needs. The CTC process promotes the positive development of youth and the prevention of adolescent problem behaviors that impede positive development (substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school dropout, and violence). For more information, go to: <http://casat.unr.edu/bestpractices/view.php?program=23>

² Research Review: Gang Violence and Prevention by Mary H. Lees, M.A., Human Development Department; Mary Deen, M.A., Extension Youth Development Specialist; and Louise Parker, Ph.D., Extension Family Economics Specialist; Washington State University.
(<http://web.archive.org/web/20021213231002/http://coopext.cahe.wsu.edu/~sherfey/issue4c.htm>)

³ Research Review: Gang Violence and Prevention by Mary H. Lees, M.A., Human Development Department; Mary Deen, M.A., Extension Youth Development Specialist; and Louise Parker, Ph.D., Extension Family Economics Specialist; Washington State University.
(<http://web.archive.org/web/20021213231002/http://coopext.cahe.wsu.edu/~sherfey/issue4c.htm>)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Youth Crime Service Unit GANG AWARENESS: A Handbook for Parents, Teachers, and Concerned Citizens, San Antonio Police Department, San Antonio Texas. (<http://www.ci.sat.tx.us/sapd/pdf/Awareness.pdf>)

⁶ See citation references at <http://www.iir.com/nygc/faq.htm#q16>. James Howell is former Director of the National Institute of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, OJJDP Deputy Administrator, OJJDP Director of Research and Program Development, and the co-author of OJJDP's "Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders." J. David Hawkins is the developer of the "Communities That Care" program.

⁷ Omara Rivera Vázquez, M.S., Ph.D. Candidate in Family and Child Studies, Michigan State University article "Predictors Of Having Ever Belonged To A Gang Among Hispanic, Black, And White Youth", Journal of Urban Youth Culture, January 2004. Available at <http://www.juyc.org/current/0401/predictors.html>.

⁸ U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice -- Research in Brief, R. C. Huff, "Comparing the Criminal Behavior of Youth Gangs and At-Risk Youth" (October 1998), available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles/172852.pdf>.

⁹ Southwest Seattle Weed and Seed Community Safety Bulletin, March 2006, Series V.
(<http://www.sfyc.net/Documents/Bulletin306.pdf>)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) is the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) primary source of school-level data on crime and safety. For more information, go to: <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs/>

¹² The School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (SCS/NCVS) is a supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and co-designed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) that collects information about school-related victimization and crime and safety in schools. For more information, go to:
<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crime/surveys.asp>

¹³ Virginia Department of Education, Annual Report Discipline, Crime, and Violence School Year 2004-2005 (April 2006). Gang activity definition in Appendix B,
http://www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/Publications/Discipline/datacoll/04_annual_report.pdf. Also see body of report for tables by DOE region of school division gang activity incidents.

¹⁴ Wyrick and Howell, <http://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/203555/jj3.html>